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ABSTRACT

The history of language in South Africa is characterized by linguistic inequality, European domination and imperialist ideology, suppression and denigration of indigenous languages through non-recognition, and entangled interrelationships among education, race, language, and identity. Official policy enforced mono- or bilingualism through the use of European languages, yet multilingualism was the norm for millions of South Africans. This paper reviews the historical context of language issues in South Africa, highlighting the developments in that history that attest to the degree of European domination and marginalization of nonwhites. It presents an overview of the Constitutional provisions that accorded language and education rights to all South Africans and focuses on the key issues that emerged in the early 1990s at the close of the apartheid era. The paper concludes by considering current and future issues, illustrated by insights from research in South African schools that underscores not only progress made as but also the fact that real transformation in terms of linguistic equality is only in its early stages. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

LANGUAGE DOMINANCE AND HOPE FOR LANGUAGE EQUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA: EXAMPLES FROM SCHOOLS*

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Abstract

Apartheid education and language policies systematically marginalized the majority of South Africans. European languages (English and Afrikaans) dominated, while indigenous languages were denigrated. Transformation policies challenge this legacy, recognizing eleven national languages and enabling a choice of instructional medium. In this paper illustrations from research in schools highlight several language-related issues including the persistent dominance of English as the global language and popular instructional medium; the potential and problems associated with using an indigenous language as the instructional medium; and the persistence of Afrikaans as an ideological tool and means of maintaining the apartheid-era status quo in some school settings

Key Words: EDUCATION
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Introduction

The history of language in South Africa is characterized by linguistic inequality, European domination and imperialist ideology, suppression and denigration of indigenous languages through non-recognition, and entangled interrelationships among education, race, language, and identity. Official policy invariably enforced mono- or bilingualism through use of the European languages, yet multilingualism was the norm in reality for millions of South Africans as they juggled their home language, learned and used one or more other languages for survival in the workplace, and negotiated their identities via means related to their position in the racially discriminatory society.

In this paper we provide a brief overview of the historical context of language issues in South Africa and we highlight the developments in that history that attest to the degree of European domination and of marginalization of nonwhites. We present an overview of the Constitutional provisions according language and education rights to all South Africans and we discuss the key issues as they had emerged in the early 1990s at the close of the apartheid era. We conclude with a consideration of current and future issues, illustrated by some insights from research in South African schools that underscores the progress made, but also the fact that real transformation in terms of linguistic equality is only in its early stages.

The relative statuses of English speaking whites, Afrikaans speaking whites, Africans, people of mixed race (formerly called Coloureds), Asians and Indians conditioned the realities in schools and in the workplace in other sectors. During the colonial and apartheid eras, official policy regarding languages served the interests of the European minority while the majority of South Africans and their languages were denied rights or recognition. For more in-depth accounts of the relationships between education, language, ideology, and policy/practice, see Brook Napier (2002) and Reagan (2001).

Developments During the Colonial and Apartheid Eras

Figure 1 contains a brief chronology of key dates in South African history pertaining to language developments. During the colonial period, dating from the first arrival of the Dutch in 1652, there were cycles of competition between English and Dutch for primacy as colonial languages but English prevailed as the dominant language into the twentieth century even as Afrikaans was promoted and strengthened as part of Afrikaner nationalism. At the time of Union, in the Milner Period, English remained the unrivalled metropolitan language and imperialist motives associated with its position in education and other sectors were no secret, as characterized by Governor Milner who told Parliament that “Dutch should only be used to teach English, and English to teach everything else” (Milner, ca. 1902, quoted in Hartshorne, 1992). From 1948 to 1994, under the apartheid government, Afrikaans rose to the fore as the dominant metropolitan language, aggressively promoted as a vehicle for Afrikaner self-determination and cultural affirmation and as a rejection of British cultural absorption. Even before 1948, Afrikaans had made inroads in joining English as an official language (see chronology in Figure 1). As apartheid legislation solidified the new status quo, Afrikaans came to be the language associated with racial segregation and white supremacy (even though segregationist policies had been initiated in more modest form under the British early in the twentieth century). The 1953 Bantu Education Act earned notoriety as a landmark of racial and cultural oppression, white “baasskap” (hegemony), and educational disempowerment for Africans in particular. As noted by Malherbe, “the Afrikaans language became the symbol of the struggle for national identity, and in the course of time the State school was seized upon as the means to foster that consciousness of a nation with a God-given destiny” (1977, p.2). The Afrikaner rallying cry during the early apartheid era was “eie volk, eie taal, eie land” ([our] own people, own language, own land), underscoring the enormous symbolic importance of language. Figure 1 shows other key developments and dates in the entrenchment of

apartheid through policies that influenced all aspects of life. In education, the issue of instructional medium, and use of mother tongue instruction followed a tortuous path, used as instruments to serve the interests of the ruling party and to maintain education for Africans and other non-whites in a position inferior to that for whites. For a detailed account of the history of black education in these decades, see Hartshorne (1992). VanRooyen (1994) offers a compelling portrait of the thinking of conservative Afrikaners and their quest for superiority, while DeKlerk (1998) and Mandela (1994) offer autobiographical accounts of life in South Africa from two vastly different perspectives, both of which shed light on educational and language realities.

Language loyalties and attitudes toward languages in South Africa were closely related to the strategies of- and events in- the liberation struggle against apartheid, as well as the counterresistance movements among whites seeking to preserve apartheid and white supremacy. In fact, matters of race, ideology, and hegemony heavily influenced life in all sectors but particularly in education, within which the issues of instructional medium and content were a mirror of policies and the status quo at any given time. Among the most prominent events in this regard were the 1976 Soweto Riots sparked by a Transvaal provincial government ruling that attempted to force use of Afrikaans for teaching of half of all subjects in Soweto Schools. The protests associated with this blatant use of language as an instrument of domination sparked a heightened climate of anti-apartheid mobilization that escalated nationwide and that culminated in the events of the early 1990s that toppled the government. At the time however, the official response was characteristic of official thinking. Deputy Minister of Education Treurnicht announced in 1976: "in the white area of South Africa where the government provides the buildings, subsidies, and pays the teachers, it is surely our right to decide what the language dispensation should be" (quoted in Hartshorne, 1992, p. 203). By the late 1980s, the racially segregated educational landscape had been in place for decades, as four unequal systems (one each for whites, Africans, Coloureds, and Indians). African

pupils were by far the most disadvantaged yet the instrumental value of English was widespread. Hartshorne summed up the situation by the late 1980s, in arguing that

“it was not feasible for black students to benefit from even an effective English medium schooling system as long as separate, vertically segmented, racial education systems were maintained. Until a new cross-cultural mainstream South African educational system is created for all children, black pupils will remain isolated from the very influences necessary to the creation of a natural environment for language learning and the effective use of English in their schooling” (Hartshorne, 1992, p. 207).

In Figure 2, some key language rulings and policies are presented to highlight the official position on instructional medium in black schools, and the single/dual medium issue that disadvantaged black schools but not white schools.

The New South Africa: Developments

Only after 1994, and specifically in the new Constitution of 1996, were linguistic rights accorded to all South Africans. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, a series of developments and a bevy of legislation under the new dispensation truncated the long established pattern of white hegemony. In language and education, as in other sectors, a new law of the land came into existence, creating possibilities for equality previously unheard of in South Africa. The revised Constitution contained some of the most sweeping provisions for equality in the world. The provisions relating to language rights and education are presented in Figure 3. In April 1996, in the spirit of popular participation and democracy, the new Constitution was made available, free, to all South Africans and in each of the new official languages (Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Tsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu). Small, soft-cover color copies of the actual Constitution, along with a heavily visual, reader-friendly “user’s manual” booklet explaining basic rights and features, were available at every post office in the country. Figure 4 shows the English and Zulu versions of the Constitution, and their corresponding booklets.

By the early 1990s, as plans for dismantling apartheid and for installation of a new dispensation were being negotiated, a set of key issues related to education and language was

evident. Hartshorne (1992, pp. 207-209) summed these up as a series of questions, as follows.

What would be the:

- political and constitutional rights of all languages in S.A., and their relationship to official language/s?
- relationships between mother tongue and any common national language that might be used as a lingua franca for national unity?
- status of the languages at national, regional, and local levels especially regarding schools and instructional medium?
- the fate of Afrikaans?
- the status of English and the prospects for its adoption as a “linking” language?
- recognition of a new South African English-for-all?

These proved to be quite apt, as they became among the central questions debated through the 1990s and into the new century, as the transition period gave way to the more recent years in which real transformation was slated to occur.

Current and Future Issues

What has emerged from the euphoria of the 1994 elections and the hopeful years of the transition (1994-1999) is a new language-related landscape, although not a level playing field. The long legacy of English dominance prevails. Afrikaans now is in a situation of endangerment yet it persists as the first language of many South Africans, including white Afrikaners and people of mixed race formerly designated as Coloureds. Previously denigrated indigenous languages now enjoy official recognition. Multilingualism has become the official and accepted norm and linguistic diversity in all of its forms (including subvarieties of English such as Black South African English and Indian English, and informal languages such as street languages and lingua francae) is now becoming accepted and desirable. Language rights and citizens' awareness of these rights are

now part of the new reality; and language-identity relationships are allowing for new notions of multilingual, multiracial national identity as well as Pan African identity. For an overview of the policy context of this period of change, see Brook (1996). The issues listed below, for the late 1990s and early 2000s are discussed in more detail in Brook Napier (2002):

- Implementation of language and education policies: variety and choice, no consistency
- Observance of language rights in all sectors
- Challenges brought before Pansalb
- Shifting relationships among the 11 national languages and other languages
- Persistence of Afrikaans
- Current status of English as linking language, global language
- Recognition of “street language” and informal languages
- “Language of reconciliation”, “rights talk”, “deracialization/reracialization”
- Language and Pan Africanism

Clearly, the sweeping change made possible by the Constitution and subsequent legislation

affords all South Africans the opportunity to participate in a better life that includes exercise of linguistic rights in education and other sectors. However, to date, the actual implementation of policies and the attainment of equity in linguistic rights remain in its early stages. Because the mechanisms for implementing the language policies in schools are not explicated in fine detail, the manner in which individual cases are dealt with varies widely.

While the new language medium policy gives any pupil the prerogative to request instruction in his/her language of choice, in reality this remains an ideal in many situations. For instance, if fewer than 40 pupils request instruction in another official language not offered by a school, the head of the provincial education department has to determine how to meet the language and education needs of these pupils, based on available resources (Language in Education Policy in terms of Section 3 (4) of the National Education Policy Act, 1996 (Act 27 of 1996) and the

Norms and Standards Regarding Language Policy Published in terms of Section 6(1) of the South African Schools Act, 1996). Schools are not required to offer more than one medium of instruction, but the policy recommends that schools' governing bodies stipulate "how multilingualism could be promoted by offering additional languages as subjects, or by other means" (quoted in SAIRR, 1998, p. 174). Consequently, one can ponder the vast variety of local situations in which language rights and own-language instruction remain to be attained.

Research in schools in the last decade suggests the continued importance of English as instructional medium and also as the international language of opportunity. In mission schools it remains a powerful presence, little changed over the last two hundred years. In an evaluation of an American volunteer teacher program in rural area Catholic mission schools in four provinces, the chief contribution of the volunteers was reportedly in their English proficiency that allowed them to assist pupils to prepare for their English matriculation examinations, to assist the African teaching staff with professional communications (such as business letters written in English), and to serve as a link with the outside world. However, in a mission school in KwaZulu Natal that happened to have a well qualified staff with good English proficiency, volunteer teachers from abroad were not seen as such a valuable commodity (Brook, 1995). In many African schools English is the instructional medium of choice but in many others it is not, Afrikaans or an indigenous language are the choice. In the early to mid 1990s, progressive private schools were the first to experience the challenges of multiracial, multilingual classrooms, and teachers were on the firing line without adequate training and support. For an overview of issues in these schools, including the challenges associated with language and instructional medium, and the importance placed on English, see Brook (1991, 1996), Christie (1992), and Freer (1991).

The penetration of indigenous languages into schools as subjects in the curriculum is only beginning, even though the eleven official languages enjoy equal status in the Languages Learning

Area of the Curriculum 2005 reform program (see National Curriculum Statement, DOE 2001, <http://education.pwv.gov.za/DoE>). For instance, in research in former white schools and township schools of Gauteng Province, Brook (1996 a, b; 1997) found that courses in an indigenous language were rare. If any, they were usually only a single elective course in Zulu or Xhosa, and they were usually taught by a non-native speaker. Regarding the reform initiatives pertaining to instructional medium and racial integration of schools, the principles of devolution of authority and decentralization allow local communities to exercise their prerogatives in matters such as linguistic rights and instructional medium in their local schools. Yet these can conflict with the rights of pupils or families entering a school and who have different language preferences and cultural backgrounds. In an important illustration of such a dilemma, Odav & Ndandane (1998) reported on their research on the realities of implementing the Schools Act (particularly the racial integration and language medium provisions) in rural Afrikaans communities in Northern Province and Northwest Province (traditionally Afrikaans dominated areas of the country) where African pupils enrolled in conservative Afrikaans medium high schools. Protests and ill feeling erupted on both sides in response to the awkward implementation mechanisms that ignored the local conservative community values as well as the feelings of the African newcomer pupils. Eventually, African pupils were taught in English, Afrikaans pupils were taught in Afrikaans as usual, but the groups were essentially segregated within the school itself. Cases such as these highlight the importance of realizing that sweeping measures for transformation do not come easily and without conflict, particularly when some initiatives can have contradictory manifestations in practice. There is a real need for more research on the school- and community level realities of policy implementation, of cases in point that add to our understanding of how transformation policies might be themselves transformed at the provincial and local levels, and of how they might be difficult to implement without creating conflict.

Conclusion

As we move into the next years of transformation in South Africa, the hope for language equality will ideally be realized by increasing numbers of South Africans, as mechanisms are refined to better accommodate the needs of all. It is probably reasonable to assume that the country will remain one in which there are many enclaves of local communities, and larger regions, that retain their cultural character with language dominance of one or another form. However, within the new environment of linguistic tolerance and multilingual possibility, the New South Africa will hopefully continue to develop as one in which all languages flourish, subvarieties of language will be acknowledged as legitimate, endangered languages will be preserved, informal languages are recognized for their worth and contributions, and linguistic diversity will become one hallmark of a transformed education system (for further discussion of these issues, see Bernstein, 2002; Mesthrie, 1993; and Reagan, 2001). While English is enjoying a new potential role as a linking language that is hybridized and indigenized, and the international language of choice, Afrikaans persists as a strong presence in many areas of the country as the dominant home language (for instance in the Northern Cape, Northwest Province, and the Free State), and as the instructional medium in large numbers of former white Afrikaans medium schools (but also in many former township schools and rural schools in Afrikaans dominated areas). Afrikaner fears for the survival of their language in the new dispensation might be allayed (DeKlerk, 1998). Our understanding of the real possibilities for a leveled playing field regarding language and education would be enhanced by more research on schools and communities to uncover the complicated relationships and factors that influence implementation of transformation policies.

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Figure 1: Some Historic Language-related Developments in South Africa

- 1820s onwards English the language of use in Cape Colony courts
 - 1853 English the exclusive language of use in Parliament
 - 1865 Education Act declared English the official instructional medium in all schools in towns
 - 1875 Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners declaration on Dutch/Afrikaner language and identity
 - 1885 onwards, Zulu instructional medium in Natal mission schools
 - 1902 onwards, Milner Period English dominance
 - 1908 First Dutch Reformed Mission school, English instruction
 - 1910 English and Afrikaans accorded equal status in Union Constitution
 - 1925 Afrikaans declared an official language, on a par with English
 - 1928 History and “mother tongue” instruction first introduced (except in Natal—Zulu already used as mother tongue instruction)
 - 1930s-40s: Afrikaans replaced Dutch as instructional medium in Afrikaans schools and colleges
 - 1935 Vernacular compulsory subject in all African schools
 - 1938 English and Afrikaans made compulsory subjects in all schools
 - 1948 National Party (NP) victory, start of apartheid era
 - 1949 Voortrekker Monument enshrines Afrikaner history and culture
 - 1953 Bantu Education Act and Native Affairs Department
 - 1955 School boycotts in African schools, ANC Charter and language rights
 - 1959 Extension of Universities Education Act, segregated universities
 - 1973 Department of Education ruling on dominant language in community and instructional medium
 - 1975 Language Monument glorifies “die taal”
 - 1976 Soweto Riots - forced use of Afrikaans instructional medium in Soweto schools
 - 1976 onwards: “open schools movement”....multiracial schools
 - 1977 Government reversal: one medium, decided on by the school
 - 1978 96% African students taught in English
 - 1987 White Paper on Education
 - 1991 Education Renewal Strategy blueprint for deracialization
 - 1994 Elections, New Dispensation, begin RDP and transition
 - 1994 All government schools “Model C” nonracial, semi-private schools, 1994 ANC framework for education
 - 1996 Revised Constitution adopted: 11 national languages
 - 1996 National Education Policy Act; South Africa Schools Act
 - 1997 Language in Education policy
 - 1998 onwards Curriculum 2003 – 2005 reforms initiated
 - 1999-2000 Pansalb (Pan South African Language Board) and implementation/challenges regarding language policies
 - 2000 South Africa National Literacy Initiative
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Figure 2. Some Key Language Rulings and Policies

- Pre 1948 official position in black schools: mother tongue instruction in first 6 years (Natal) or 4 years (Cape and Free State) or two years (Transvaal). Thereafter, “official language” (English) was to be used. Bilingualism requirements satisfied in English and Afrikaans in all provinces except Natal (English and Zulu).
 - Apartheid era national language policy and instructional medium policy: Mother tongue medium beyond Grade 4 (rejected by Africans); dual medium policy mandating English and Afrikaans for Africans, not for whites.
 - 1973 Department of Education ruling: dominant official language in surrounding community should determine what single medium is used in schools.
 - 1976 Soweto Riots over ruling: half of all classes must be taught in Afrikaans.
 - 1977 Single medium ruling: resolved instructional medium question
 - 1982 Ruling: allowing English to be used from Grade 5 onwards (STD. 3)
 - 1991: Educational Renewal Strategy: blueprint for dismantling apartheid education
 - 1994: New Dispensation: RDP, ANC declaration on education, transitional policies, New Constitution
 - 1996 South African Schools Act: Major legislation to transform schools
 - 1996 National Educational Policy Act: Major legislation containing language provisions for instructional medium and schools.
-

Figure 3: Extracts from the 1996 Revised Constitution (11 national languages, language rights, education, Pansalb)

- Preamble: “We, the people of South Africa, Recognize the injustices of our past” (p.1)
- Founding Provisions: The eleven official languages are listed: “Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Tsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu” (Par.6, section 1).
- The need to overcome the historical legacy sections 2 and 3: the “state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use” of the indigenous languages, and in section 4 that states “all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably”.
- The principle of bilingualism, in section 3: while any of the languages may be used for government, “the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages” while “municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents” (Par. 6, section 3b).
- Pan South African Language Board (Pansalb), its mission noted in the Founding Provisions,

“to promote and create conditions for the development, use, and respect of all official languages, the Khoi, Nama and San languages, sign language, and all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu, and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa” (Chapter 1, Par. 6, section 5).

- The provisions for freedom of expression essentially accord all communication and information flow protection and recognition (Section 16, p. 9).
- The right to a quality education and language rights, in the Bill of Rights too, in Section 29 (par. 2):

“Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account a) equity b) practicability, and c) the need to redress the results of the past racially discriminatory laws and practices.” (p. 14)

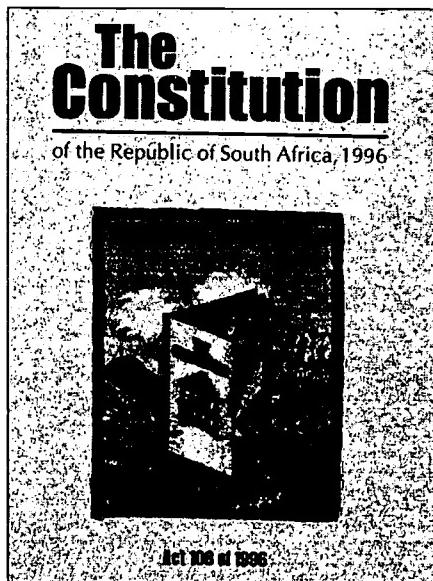
Figure 3—Continued

- Section 30 Language and Culture ensure protection for the rich diversity of languages and cultures in the country for the first time, stating that:

“Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights.” (p. 15).
 - Section 31(Cultural, religious, and linguistic communities) accords rights to any community to practice and use their language and to participate in cultural, religious and linguistic associations (p. 15)
 - Language related protections in other rights, such as in the right “to be tried in a language that the accused person understands” (Section 35, par. 3, p. 17)
-

Figure 4: English and Zulu Versions of the Constitution and User's Manual

English Version of the Constitution:



English Version of User's Manual:

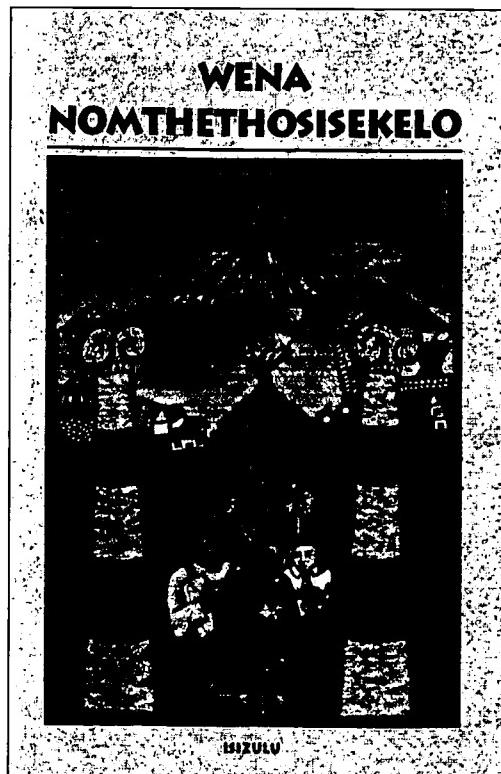


Figure 4--Continued

Zulu Version of the Constitution:



Zulu Version of User's Manual:



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